DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 215 035 UD 022 184

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TITLE Schools, As Political Institutions and Ghetto/Barrio Educational Aspirations.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Ghettos; *Illiteracy; Language Dominance; Multicultural Education; *Political Influences; *Political Power; Poverty; *School Role; Self Concept; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

In New York City ghetto schools eighty-five percent of the students are reading below grade level. This points to failure, not of the students but of the school system. In District One, although seventy-three percent of the children are Puerto Rican and eight percent are Chinese, only six of the district's nearly 900 teachers are bilingual. If teachers do not understand what their students are asking, they cannot answer in a language that the students understand. In order to address these problems, it is necessary to view schools as political institutions and to understand the political realities that enforce racial oppression and poverty in our society. Thus, Paulo Freire's concept of the "object world," "discovered, invaded, subjugated, governed, then educated, converted and assisted by another," can be applied to ghettos and ghetto schools. According to Freire, liberation can only occur if the oppressed become actively involved in their own education. Ghetto children must refuse to accept the unsatisfactory, passive roles that a monolingual, English speaking educational system imposes upon them. Bilingual/bicultural education is a beginning in the deconditioning process. It can create a consciousness in young people that will enable them to understand and defeat their oppression. (Author/GC)

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Schools, As Political Institutions And Ghetto/Barrio Educational Aspirations

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UD 022 184

SCHOOLS, AS POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS
AND GHETTO/BARRIO
EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

For three years I was a superintendent in a supposedly decentralized city system, a Puerto Rican superintendent atop the traditional New York school staff. I lived in a world of binding contracts with professional unions, negotiated by others, a world of procedures, titles, endless forms, stripped budgets, and legally circumscribed powers. It is a world where the child is subordinate to the job, a system dedicated above all else to protecting the incumbent job holder. I and the Community Board that selected me, recognized that we were part of the largest single industry in the City of New York, that this industry includes education as one of its possible side-effects, but that its primary effect is the redistribution of public resources in the form of salaries and contracts to a political constituency.

In the midst of all this I moved daily from frustration to frustration. District one is the smallest of New York City's 32 districts. Seventy three percent of the children are Puerto Rican, 15% Black and 8% Chinese. District-wide 84.6% of the children are behind grade level reading. Thereare those who call statistics like this a sign of failure; but if 85% of the product of any industry shared a basic characteristic, we would assume that it was the intention of that industry to mark its product with that characteristic. The 15% not so marked would be considered deviate. Thus it is that I conclude that the 15% of our children who graduate from our schools <u>able</u> to read at their grade level are deviate. The system is 85% <u>successful</u>! Illiteracy is its product.

The intentionality of this production of illiteracy is clearest in the Barrios and Ghettos where there is no mystery as to the basic cause of the illiteracy. It is language. But it's the teachers and adminis-

trators that are plagued with the gravestkind of language problem.

If teachers do not understand what their students are asking, neither can they answer in a language that the students understand. That is, in the language of the students' homes and students' community. I refuse to accept the way in which that statistic is traditionally presented by Boards of Education, that is, that these children do not speak English. I am proud of the skills they do have, skills that flow naturally from their cultures. The system's statistical bias shifts the balance into a deficiency our children are supposed to have. We never hear statistics describing how many non-Spanish speaking or non-Chinese speaking teachers and administrators there are in a district. That's where the responsibility lies. In this New York City barrio district in 1972, there are exactly six bilingual teachers on tax levy budgets teaching in the classrooms in the district. That meant that there were almost 900 non-Spanish speaking and non-Chinese speaking professionals in that district. That is the threshhold cause of the massive illiteracy. We will not listen to the nonsense about cultural deprivation and the destructive environment of poverty. Even if there were ever any validity of these theories, they cannot be the cause of massive illiteracy in ghettos and barrios. In the Lower East Side teachers are not even communicating with our children. We cannot begin to examine all of those other crucial sociological and pathological escape routes that some academicans find easy to use. But let's investigate the causes.

In this essay I am attempting to advance an understanding of schools as political institutions that describe the destructive consequences of the politics that are played, and define who dominates and why.

I want to go beyond the traditional form of analysis. I am using the schools as a case in point, understanding the political relationship that isolates and enforces racial poverty within cities. I have

lived in tenements 20 years as a child, and as an adult, and what I have experienced is not satisfied by the word "poverty". Poverty is the lack of resources. It is a neutral and digestible term. Oppression, on the other hand, is a political concept. Poverty simply describes a condition; oppression exposes it, analyzes it, re-creates the causes and consequences of it. People in barrios and ghettos are not poor; they are oppressed. Neither do they live in a slum; they live in an extended version of a colony. Slum is a mere descriptive. Colony is again a political concept that unveils reality and places these neighorhoods inside a historical process, delineating a structure to oppression.

Paulo Freire, whose description of the politics of Latin American oppression parallel in many respects the descriptions of ghetto-barrio politics, has written of a similar language problem in the context of Third World political change:

> Repression. . . is preceded and accompanied by a myth-making effort to identify as diabolical all thought-language which uses such words as alienation, domination, oppression, liberation, humanization and autonomy. . . A de-mystifying work is necessary to show what the words really stand for: the expression of objective, socio-historical and political categories whose dramatic character in the Third World allows no one to be neutral.

Just as this terminology is inescapable in defining the political realities of the Third World, it is vital for understanding the realities within America's homegrown semi-colonies.

Words like colonialism and oppression, affixed to relationships in ghetto-barrios become rhetoric when they are imposed deductively. I have come to the use of this language reluctantly. I avoided the terminology as leftist and doctrinnaire, unacceptable to a New York Times reader and, thereby, deadly to the prospects of reaching people.

The ideology originates with Freire, a Brazilian educator whose thought has been generally extended to much of the Third World. His vision of the Third World is that of an "object world" which was

"discovered invaded, subjugated, governed, then educated, converted and assisted by another." The purpose of this "systematic concern" for one world by another is its "pacification."

My contention is that ghettos and barrios are the same kind of object worlds-owned, policed, renewed, assisted, analyzed by another. Indeed didn't Michael Harrington "discover" this world in 1960 and doesn't it continuously pass through periods of neglect and rediscovery by the media of the other world?

Freire sees the fundamental dimension of these object worlds, "resulting from their colonial phase" as the fact that their cultures were "established and maintained as 'cultures of silence'." He defines the culture of silence as follows:

"The alienated society as a whole, as the mere object of the director society, is not heard by the latter. On the contrary the director society describes its word, thereby effectively silencing it."

"The dependent society is by definition a silent society. Its voice is not an authentic voice, but merely an echo of the voice of the metropolis--in every way, the metropolis speaks, the dependent society listens."

Barrio silence is similarly imposed. That fact is the essential lesson of my experiences, the desperation is enforced, the barrio's resistance is in turn resisted and that the voicelessness is powerfully inflicted. The barrio's fundamental theme, expressed in the struggle for its schools, has been to become "one who has a voice, one who is the subject of his choices, and one who freely projects his own destiny."

Freire calls the process of liberation "conscientization," which he argues "refers to the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-

cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capability to transform that reality."

It is appropriate that in America's semi-colonial replications of Third World "object societies," the decolonization process has begun with the schools. Education is the key to conscientization. "There is no neutral education," says Freire. "Education is either for domestication or for freedom. Although it is customarily conceived of as a conditioning process, education can equally be an instrument for deconditioning." That is the possibility raised by struggles in the barrios, struggles frustrated precisely because in the 60's and 70's they contained the potential to decondition oppressed people and clarify their oppression. The maintenance of the culture of silence depends upon a conditioned acceptance of the inevitability of things as they are and the obscurity of the structure of oppression. If it is understood, it can be transformed.

I believe that liberation only comes with a genuine transformation of mass perception--conscientization and that Third World peoples are increasingly viewing their lives as managed internationally. They see more similarity between barrio schools and those of a Latin society than between barrios and those of the white, middle class community next door to barrios. Whether the Freire model is applicable or not, the conflict over urban public schools is of frightful importance as a reflection of national tensions. There is no system, under more profound attack and no system where power is more ruthlessly exercised. If indeed I am wrong, and its politics are not the politics of colonialism, they are minimally the politics of a coherent, relentless racism.

Clearly the best means of enforcing silence is to deny the legitimacy of the language of the colonized. Also, clearly, a prerequisite for breaking the culture of silence is established the legitimacy of our

language. Just as education is the key mechanism for institutionalizing the silence of oppressed peoples, it can be transformed into an instrument for liberation. Martin Carnoy, in his book Education as Culture Imperialism, has written:

> Schools are colonialistic in that they attempt to impose economic and political relationships in the society, especially on those children who gain least or lose most from those relationship. Schools demand the most passive response from those groups in society who are the most oppressed by the economic and political system, and allow the most active participation and learning from those who are least likely to want change. While this is logical in preserving the status quo, it is also a means of colonizing children to accept unsatisfactory roles.

All of us who have watched what happens to Hispanic children in Anglo classrooms know that the denial of the child's language is virtually a guarantee of the child's intellectual passivity. Monolingual classes in every American city teach passivity to non-English-speaking-children. Children cannot be heard in classrooms where their language is not understood.

I believe, then, that the colonial relationship is enforced in every monolingual classroom. The resistance to bilingual education is a recognition of its danger to the monolingual system. Bilingual education invests our language with legitimacy, invests our children with a voice, and represents a threat to the imposed culture of silence.

Bilingual education is a beginning in the deconditioning process for Latino children.

Of course, we must carry it further than that. We must care as much about what is being said in the classroom as we do about what language it is being said in. As Freire cautions: "movements toward emergence do not always break open the culture of silence. . . the phenomenon of the emerging masses forces the power elites to experiment with new forms of maintaining the masses in silence. . ." Bilingual education can also be turned against our children if it does not

become the form by which they develop as "knowing subjects" a deepening awareness--as Freire says--"of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality." Bilingual/ bicultural education, can in this sense, become our vehicle for creating a consciousness in our young that will enable them to understand the oppressive reality that exists and defeat it.

We were determined to make changes in District one. We appointed seven bilingual principals in six months, and filled teacher vacancies bilingually. Our actions were based on a single premise: The teachers and principals had been running these schools based upon what was best for their union membership; it was for the community to run them based upon what is best for our children. Schools are for children and the jobs are to be filled by those who can offer something to children. Language is a threshold issue. If you can't communicate--you can't teach. It is terrifying to realize that we have reached a stage in this country where so obvious an axiom is so dangerous an idea. But in the barrios we will not let this idea loose, it will not be stolen and transcribed into tired formulas, for academics.